

Larry Adler's Ghost Stories

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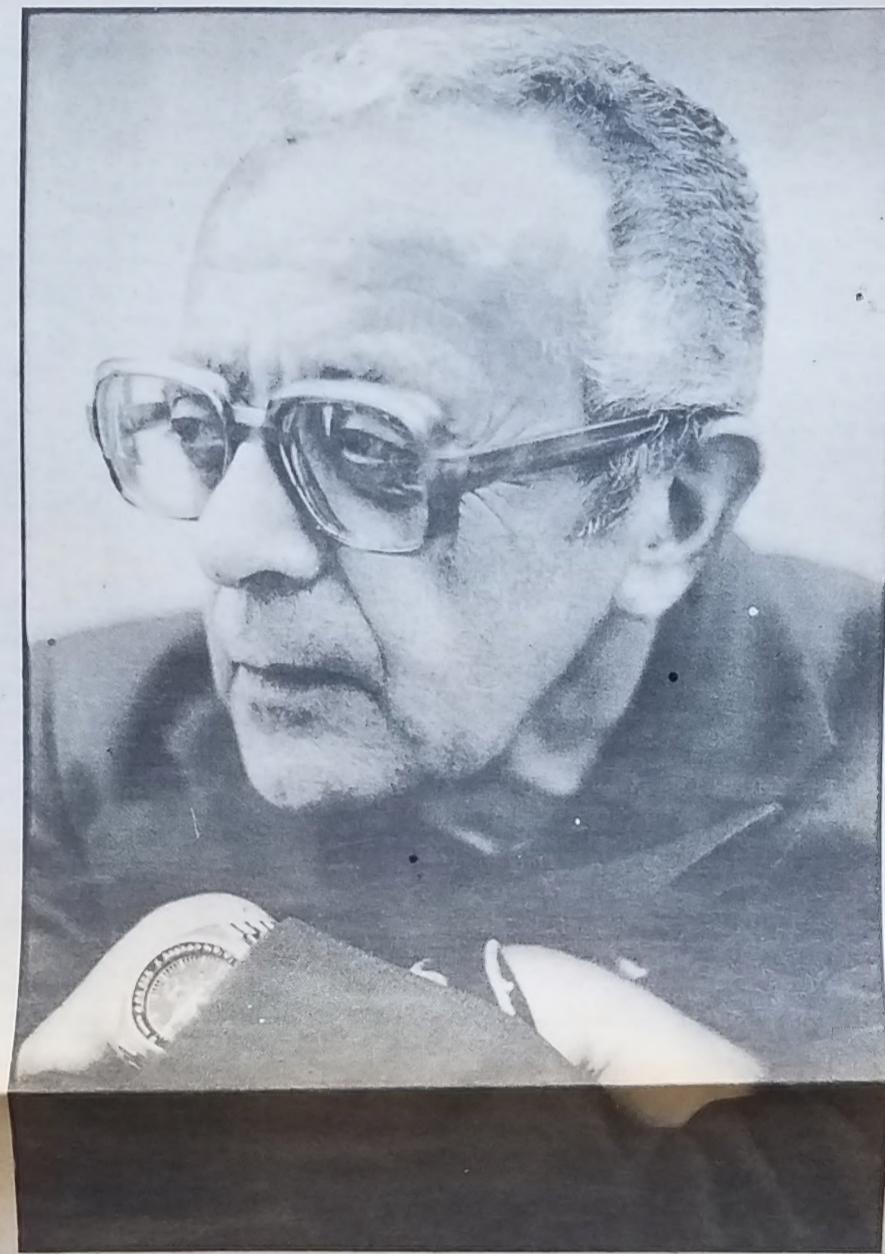
By Gary Giddins

Larry Adler has achieved something only a handful of musicians in history can claim: he's given a folk instrument aesthetic clout. Adler, the 65-year-old virtuoso appearing at the Cookery through September 8, rescued the harmonica from our collective childhood, dressed it in symphonic tails, integrated it into jazz ensembles and film scores, and enticed from it an unprecedented diversity of sounds and techniques—seamless legato phrasing to trills to contrapuntal harmonics. But for all his instrumental skill, the stigma of novelty is not easily expunged. No other musical noise has so many ready-made folk associations, from the bluesman's wail to the cowboy's lullabye; few instruments so willingly give up a perfect tone—a moan, a cry, an evocation—to anyone's untutored exhalation.

Because most of us never got past that maiden tone, the instrument's masters—the Chicago blues dynasty from Little Walter to Junior Wells, the slapstick shenanigans of the Harmonicats, the icy modernist reserve of Toots Thielemans, and the brilliant, dusty, yelping of Sonny Terry—tend to provoke skeptical wonder. No matter how commanding a performance, you never forget that all that music is coming from a damned harmonica. The instrument was invented by an Englishman named Sir Charles Wheatstone in 1829, but the whine that escapes its metallic reeds is the eternal sound of American nocturnes and American zip and American kitsch.

Adler might be characterized as quintessentially American himself, in his pioneering arrogance, his improvisational know-how, his courage, persistence, and wily humor. He was the only student ever expelled from the Peabody Conservatory, at the time he copped first prize in a mouth organ (his preferred term) contest, and was sufficiently unbound by orthodoxies to find his idols in Heifetz, Rachmaninoff, Caruso, Armstrong, Ellington, and Jolson. When he set out from Baltimore at 14, chromatic Hohner in hand, he was a gifted musician without music to play, so for more than 40 years, Adler inspired or commissioned symphonic composers, among them Darius Milhaud and Ralph Vaughan Williams, to write him a repertoire; he adapted numerous classical and popular anthems on his own, and learned to extrapolate handily enough to intrigue Duke Ellington, Django Reinhardt, and Mary Lou Williams. The adaptability he displayed as a musician fortified him in the nightmare years when America lost itself to HUAC's reign. That was in the late '40s, when he was depicted, in his words, as "the greatest subversive, communist, left-wing, agitating, revolutionary character since Zinoviev tried to overthrow the British government, only I was doing the whole thing with a mouth organ."

Adler is a compact, energetic man who favors dark sports clothes, and doesn't seem to have changed much in 20 years, except that he once combed his hair back and now combs it forward. He compares the mouth organ to the human voice in flexibility, and has strong opinions about his colleagues: "Toots Thielemans's jazz is far superior to mine—I get jealous as hell when I hear him play—but he's only got one sound. I admire Sonny Terry. He plays right out of his belly, I could never get those sounds. Stevie Wonder gets a good commercial sound, it's marvelous, but he has no variety at all. I don't think John Sebastian's very good, and Bob Dylan can't play for nuts. His sound is awful and his interpretation worse. I don't think any mouth organ player can get my variety. If they can play good jazz, they sure as hell can't play Bach. That's because I love every style of music, with the sole exception of rock."



Knickerbocker, collaborated with him on "Caravan," commenting later, "He's a genius. He plays nice chords—usually they play corny chords. I think he could play the modern stuff if he worked on it."

Adler's first in a string of encounters with noted jazz musicians coincided with his first movie offer, to play "Sophisticated Lady" in the 1934 film, *Many Happy Returns*, for \$300. The Guy Lombardo orchestra was hired to accompany him. "I refused. So they fired me and rehired me and fired me, and it went all the way to the head of the studio, William LeBaron, but I flatly refused to work with Lombardo. I said, 'You know who I like? I like Duke Ellington,' and LeBaron said, 'Well, I like Duke Ellington, too, Larry, but you can't expect us to hire him to accompany you, he isn't even in California.' At 2 a.m., LeBaron called and said, 'Well, you little son of a bitch, we got Ellington.'"

Ellington was paid \$5000 to back Adler's \$300, but wasn't photographed or credited, because Lombardo wasn't supposed to know about the switch. Afterwards, Adler's intractability resulted in "one of the greatest regrets" of his life. Ellington's manager, Irving Mills, offered him a contract to record 50 sides with Ellington, at \$25 each. Having read in *Variety* that Bing Crosby got a 5 per cent royalty, Adler demanded the same; Mills told him what he could do with his royalties. "That same year, Duke and I were at the Grand Terrace in Chicago. Earl Hines, who had the band, called on us and we got up to play 'Sophisticated Lady.' Afterwards, Duke brought me over to a table where a lady was sitting by herself. He said, 'Larry, I want you to meet Billie Holiday.' I put out my hand to say how do-you-do and she said, 'Man, you don't play that fucking thing, you sing it.' Oh God, I can't tell you what it did to me."

There was another encounter with a jazz legend in 1938, when Adler attended a concert by the Quintette du Hot Club in Paris. Charles Delaunay, the master of ceremonies, introduced Adler, to his great surprise, and asked him to do a number. "I stood up and said, 'It's very embarrassing but I haven't got a mouth organ.' And Django Reinhardt said, 'I've got one,' and pulled it out of his pocket." The encounter led to a recording session for Columbia, with Reinhardt's quintet accompanying Adler on four perennially reissued sides.

There is a waitress at the Cookery who is studying to be a concert pianist, and when Adler found out he invited her to join him on "Clair de Lune." His favorite mode of performing is the symphonic concert, and although the mouth organ piano instrumentation limits his repertoire, he's gratified by the audience's interest in his classical transcriptions.

In 1934, when he started recording, Adler scored one of his first hits with a drastically abridged version of Ravel's "Bolero." When he performed it a year later at the Alhambra in Paris, a controversy ensued and Ravel requested him to play it in his home. "I played it in front of him, feeling like a shmuck. It was so embarrassing and he never moved a muscle. He just listened to me, and when I finished it, he said, 'You've cut it.' I said, 'Well, yes, I had to because I do a vaudeville act and you can't do just one number in a 12-minute act.' He said, 'You know Toscanini?' I said yes. He said, 'Toscanini doesn't cut it.' He was looking at me and I was looking at him and nothing was being said. So out of sheer desperation, I held up my record of 'Bolero' and said, 'Maestro, would you sign this for me?' He said he thought the record was a present for him, which amazed me, and I said, 'Sure, Maestro,' and left it with him.

"Three days later, I received a call from Jacques Lyon, who ran a record shop on the Champs Elysees. He said, 'Get over

This variety is drily exhibited at the Cookery, where music and anecdote are woven into 40-minute autobiographical montages. Accompanied by pianist Hal Schaffer when he isn't accompanying himself, Adler plays a program of pop songs from the golden age, classical favorites (or more pop songs from another golden age), a couple of originals from his film scores, and an occasional novelty, such as a medley of cowboy songs; these are interspersed with stories and asides related with the sing-song conversationalism and brevity of a master in the Jewish tradition of storytelling. When he hits a groove on the fast tempos—"Where or When," "On the Street Where You Live"—he achieves a rhythmic unanimity that is much like swing, though I don't think it's quite the McCoy. On ballads, he evinces a charming, Gallic romanticism underscored by wit and drama.

The mouth organ lends itself to drama, with its startling dynamic range, and I find Adler most rewarding when he kvels his way through minor tempests, as on "Malaguena," "Rhapsody in Blue," "Blues in the Night," "Sophisticated Lady," "Am I Blue," and "Bolero." He's been adding classical numbers to the set in response to audience requests, but at least one selection is always in his repertoire. It's Beethoven's Minuet in G, which he plays in C, employing counterpoint and double stops. In 1928, it was his ticket out of Baltimore.

Adler abandoned the piano and the conservatory at 10, piqued because his grandfather had compared him unfavorably to a concertizing prodigy of the day. Four years later, he entered a mouth organ contest sponsored by the Baltimore

Sun; while the other contestants trotted out pop ditties, Adler snared the judges with Beethoven. He used the prize to travel north, but a New York audition for Borrah Minevitch (who later graduated a couple of the Harmonicats) ended in three words of advice: "Kid, you stink." Trekking despondently back to Penn Station, he eyed Rudy Vallee's name on a marquee, sneaked in, and wrangled a job for the evening. He flopped, but a subsequent evening with bandleader Paul Ash led to a 44-week contract with Paramount, traveling the country in what the English called Cine-Variety: "You'd be on the bill with a film, and the number of shows you did depended on how popular it was. In Mae West's heyday, I might find myself doing six shows a day, and you did the same goddam act, because once you rehearsed with the band you couldn't change. By the time you walked out for the fourth show, you hated it and were all tightened up. But it gave me the training to walk on and off a stage, not to be afraid of a cold audience—training you couldn't get today." Soon he was stooging for Dan Healey (two men wrestled a bear while Adler played mouth organ; the climax came when the bear pulled someone's pants off) and Eddie Cantor. In Ziegfeld's 1931 *Smiles*, he worked with Fred Astaire and became famous enough to interest Hollywood.

Adler plays a lot of jazz at the Cookery, and hopes to record with some jazz musicians while in New York. He can improvise cleverly and sympathetically, but as he once confessed, in a manner exemplifying what he calls Jewish gallows humor, "I am not now, nor have I ever been, a jazz musician." One evening, Mary Lou Williams, who's playing down the block at the

MOVIES

Continued from page 64

THURSDAY (Aug 16):

Race for the Yellow Jersey, by Tom Spain, Fordham Lbry, 2556 Bainbridge Av, Bx, 3 p.m. (free);

Flipper (1963), with Chuck Connors, Soundview Lbry, 660 Soundview Av, Bx, 4 p.m. (free);

The Witches, see Wed, Aug 15;

Rebel Without a Cause and Walk on the Wild Side, see Wed, Aug 15;

On the Town, with Frank Sinatra, Gene Kelley, Jules Munshin, Vera-Ellen, Betty Garrett, Pacific Lbry, 4th Av at Pacific, Bklyn, 6 p.m. (free);

X from Outer Space (1967), by Kazui Nihonmatsu, and Noriaki Yuasa's **Gammera the Invincible** (1965), Japan House, 333 E 47th, 832-1155, 7:30 p.m. (\$3);

Independent films, Filmmobile, J. J. Bryne Park, betw 4th and 5th Av and 3rd and 4th Sts, Bklyn, 9 p.m. (free);

Documentaries on Romania, Romanian Lbry, 200 E 38th, 5:30 p.m. (free);

Ithaca Video Festival, see Wed, Aug 15;

Porcupine Quill Work; A Pair of Moccasins; Alice Elliot; **Eskimo Artist**; Kenojuak, 11 a.m., **Lacrosse Stick Maker**; **Kwakiutl Artist**; **Haida Carver**; **Sarah Smith**; **a Mohawk Potter**, 1 p.m., Old U.S. Custom House, Bowling Green (free);

Lincoln Ctr Sound and Light Spectacular, Lincoln Ctr Plaza, 9:30 p.m. (free);

Unity in Diversity, Asia House, 112 E 64th, 6 p.m. (\$1);

The Trip (1967), by Roger Corman, with Peter Fonda, Bruce Dern, Susan Strasberg, Richard Rush's **Psych-Out** (1968), with Strasberg, Jack Nicholson, Dean Stockwell, Dern, 2:30 p.m.; Curtis Harrington's **Night Tide** (1963), with Dennis Hopper, Luana Anders, 6 p.m., Vernon Zimmerman's **The Unholy Rollers**, 8:30 p.m., Museum of Modern Art (mus adm \$2.50);

To Be or Not to Be, with Jack Benny, Carole Lombard, Saratoga Lbry, Hopkinson Av at Macon, Bklyn, 2:30 p.m. (free);

Modern Times, with Chaplin, Spring Creek Lbry, Flatlands Av nr NJ Av, Bklyn, 7 p.m. (free);

FRIDAY (Aug 17):

Rose Hobart (1937), by Joseph Cornell, Stan Brakhage's **Anticipation of the night** (1958), Kenneth Anger's **Eaux d'Artifice** (1953), Maya Deren's **Mesches of the Afternoon** (1943), Ian Hugo's **Bells of Atlantis**, Downtown Drive-In spon by Creative Time, lot on Wall St south of William St, 9 p.m. (free);

Little Women (1933), by George Cukor, with Katharine Hepburn, Joan Bennett, Paul Lukas, Wakefield Lbry, 4100 Lowerre Pl, Bx, 1 and 3 p.m. (free);

The Witches, 4, 6, 8, 10 p.m., see Wed, Aug 15;

Avant-garde films by Paul Wood and Neil Ira Neediemer, Washington Sq Church, 133 W 4th, 8 p.m. (\$1);

The Totem Pole and Wooden Box, 11 a.m., **Porcupine Quill Work; A Pair of Moccasins**; Alice Elliot; **Eskimo Artist**; Kenojuak, 1 p.m., **Lacrosse Stick Maker**; Tony Hunt, **Kwakiutl Artist**; **Haida Carver**; **Sarah Smith**; **a Mohawk Potter**, 1 p.m. (free);

Flipper (1963), with Chuck Connors, Soundview Lbry, 660 Soundview Av, Bx, 4 p.m. (free);

The Amazing Colossal Man, noon, Old U.S. Custom House, Bowling Green (free);

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here at once. Maestro Ravel is in my shop and wants to see you.' I rushed over and there was Ravel with a piece of paper bearing his signature. Then, in 1943, I did a concert with the Philadelphia Symphony, and was asked to prepare an encore. I said, what about 'Bolero,' and they said we'd have to pay a performing rights fee, too expensive, think of something else. I said, 'Look, Ravel's publishers, Elkan, Vogel, are in Philadelphia. Maybe because I knew Ravel they'll give me a rate.' So I went over there and Mr. Elkan came out and said, 'We know all about you, Mr. Adler.' Ravel had left in his will rights to me to play 'Bolero' without any performing fees. I could play it anyway I liked, in boogie woogie tempo if I wanted."

European composers had been taking an interest in Adler since his tour of London in 1934. Cyril Scott was the first to write expressly for Adler; around the same time, George Gershwin authorized a new arrangement of "Rhapsody in Blue" for him. When Darius Milhaud heard him play the "Rhapsody" in 1943, he offered to write him a suite. During the next decade, concertos were written for him by Vaughan Williams, Malcolm Arnold, and Arthur Benjamin, among a dozen others. At the same time, Adler honed his talents as a monologist under the tutelage of Jack Benny. They did USO tours together, and when Benny needed a 45-minute broadcast in Cairo, Adler wrote it for him. He was at the pinnacle of his career in the '40s, touring either as the guest soloist with symphony orchestras, or in an ambitious act with the dancer Paul Draper that became a top box office draw. Then the trouble began.

A certain amount of sentimentality attends Adler's engagement at the Cookery. His producer is Barney Josephson, whose Cafe Society clubs were shut down by the House Un-American Activities Committee. "What they wanted Barney to do was denounce his own brother," Adler says. "Winchell wanted to make a deal with me

—all I had to do was denounce Henry Wallace and Paul Draper." Sometimes the reminiscing hangs heavy—"It's marvelous to see my old friends, but a lot of people who come to the Cookery are almost lachrymose about good old Larry and how brave he was. I do wish they'd let the subject alone."

Adler had been a member of numerous left-wing organizations when, in 1947, he joined the Committee for the First Amendment, to protest the inquisition of the Hollywood writers known as the Unfriendly 19, later the Unfriendly 10. They chartered planes to Washington, and all hell broke loose when they arrived. "The press attacked us and Humphrey Bogart caved in in the most demeaning, debasing way, saying that he was duped, didn't realize what he was doing, but was sorry and knew the American people would allow him one mistake. And then Gene Kelly reneged, and Danny Kaye reneged, and Frank Sinatra reneged, and those of us who didn't stand out like carbuncles." During the next year, Adler and Draper filed a libel suit against Hestor McCulloch, who had written that they should not be allowed to perform in Greenwich, because money paid them went directly to Moscow. The Hearst press took up the cudgel, and soon the duo's signed contracts were canceled. A blacklist took effect and in 1949, while touring London, Adler's wife convinced him to stay abroad until it blew over. It didn't.

At Isaac Stern's suggestion, Sol Hurok agreed to produce Adler in 1952 if the American Legion didn't picket. A concert at Town Hall was sold out and received wildly favorable reviews, despite attempts to force him to cancel. Hurok insisted that his board of directors would not let him continue the association. William Morris booked Adler in Vegas, but the Legion stepped in and the contract was repudiated. "When I came back in 1952, I sat at Sardi's with Elia Kazan, John Garfield, Frank Loesser, Charlie Letterer, and

Abe Burrows, and we knew that Kazan had been subpoenaed by the Un-American Activities Committee, and Kazan said, 'I've got two million bucks in the bank, and nobody's going to make me talk.' We thought, 'good old Kazan.' Two days later, a quarter page ad appears in the *New York Times*, signed by Kazan, in which he said that to keep silent was to play the Communist game. He went to Washington and gave a tremendous list of names, including Clifford Odets. The night he went before the committee, I had dinner at Meyer Davis's house and there was Odets. I said, 'Cliff, you must feel awful, having one of your best friends name you.' And Odets said, 'Larry, how do we know what kind of pressure he was under, who are we to judge?' I thought, this guy's a saint; I felt like a shmuck for even bringing it up. The next week, Odets went before the committee and named everybody, including Kazan. They'd made a deal—you name me and I'll name you.

"Abe Burrows called me to have lunch and said, 'Larry, you're about to give this recital at Town Hall. Why don't you make a public non-Communist statement and go down to Washington? What do you say? The main thing is to get back to work, we want you back playing your mouth organ.' I said, 'Abe, that's not for me.' He said, 'Larry, it makes it embarrassing for your friends. Your name comes up in conversations and I don't know what to say.' I said, 'I'll tell you what you say, say you don't know me.' He said, 'Come on, you're taking it the wrong way.' I didn't know that Abe was about to go before the committee and give names." Adler returned to London.

The English film director Henry Cornelius hired him to compose the score for his film, *Genevieve*, in 1953. Six weeks before it opened at the Sutton theatre, the producer was asked to submit a new set of credits omitting Adler's name. The music was nominated for an Academy Award, and when the nominations were read,

Muir Matheson, who conducted the orchestra, was named as composer. "About a year later, I saw the Mathesons, and asked him why he accepted the nomination. He looked me straight in the eye and said, 'I thought I was being nominated simply for services to British music.' In 1959, Art D'Lugoff booked Adler for a triumphant homecoming engagement at the newly opened Village Gate, where he was accompanied by Ellis Larkins. Years later, Adler learned that James Thurber, E.J. Kahn, and Kenneth Tynan had guaranteed D'Lugoff against any loss.

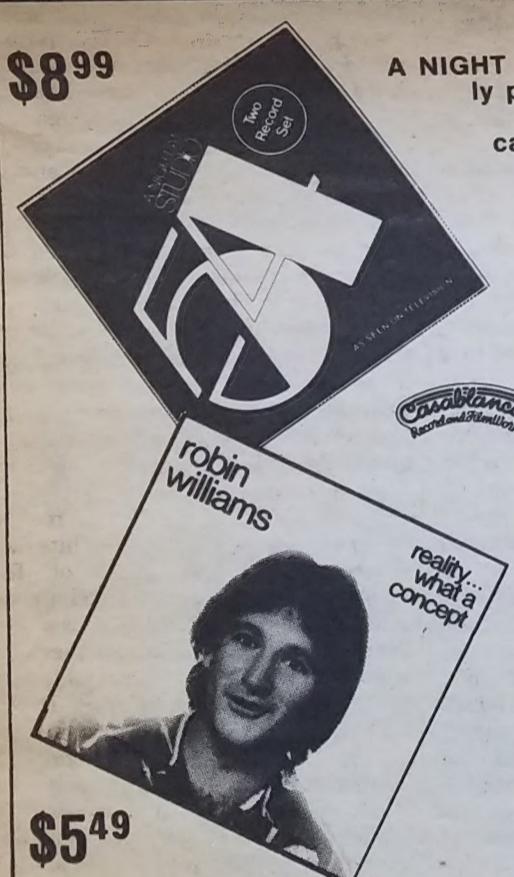
That year, he made a TV appearance with Dizzy Gillespie, and recorded two pop/jazz albums for Audiofidelity, with Larkins, a badly underrecorded Ruby Braff, Joe Benjamin, and Paul Motian. There have been occasional tours and concerts in the United States ever since, but Adler will continue to live in London, where he's a celebrity not only for his music but for his fanatical devotion to tennis and his articles and book reviews in the *New Statesman*, the *Spectator*, *Punch*, the *Jewish Chronicle*, and the *Sunday Times*.

As recently as 1965, Sol Hurok told Adler that a concert tour in America would be difficult to bring off because "concert committees are run by Republican ladies with long memories." Ironically, Adler's instrument attests to those memories. It's a Larry Adler model of the Hohner Super Chromonica, which is sold all over the world—but not in the United States. Another sort of memory, every bit as tenacious, asserted itself one night at the Cookery. As Adler circled back from the mike to the cash register in ritual prelude to his encore, a tall and gaunt Alger Hiss walked in. They embraced under Barney Josephson's benevolent gaze, and an onlooker swears that they later toasted themselves for outlasting Winchell and Kilgallen and McCarthy and other ghosts that not even the torrid lament of a mouth organ can lay to rest.

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